

## True to the Task

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# TRUE TO THE TASK

"*The Task* gives me confidence for the future of Dordt," says President Erik Hoekstra. "Dordt is only 65 years old, so we shouldn't get prideful, but we also need to celebrate that we have worked at keeping the purpose of Christ-centered education central to Dordt."

## The Educational Task of Dordt University

### TAKING ON THE TASK

*The Educational Task of Dordt University* is an 18-page statement of purpose describing "how a Reformed confession of biblical faith impacts Christian higher education." Students may not know much about it, but *The Task* is a lynchpin for a Dordt education—or, as President Erik Hoekstra says, an educational creed—a statement of beliefs that guide action.

"While nearly every institution has a mission statement, very few have taken

the time to dive deeper into a document like *The Task*, and fewer still base such a document on Christian principles," says Hoekstra. "Having a document like *The Task* provides the gravitational pull to align all our activities and efforts at Dordt in the same direction."

*The Task*, says Hoekstra, has helped Dordt to stay in line with and is a deeper articulation of the Founders Vision—that "all the class work, all of the students' intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity."

"So, not in the sense that we just have on-campus Bible studies or chapel services wrapped around a traditional university but that, in a larger and deeper sense, everything here—from courses to co-curriculars—is permeated with the truth of the Gospel," says Hoekstra.

Although *The Task* was developed and adopted between 1979 and 1996, it was not the first document of its kind; another statement, adopted in 1961, consisted of 17 propositions to guide the development of Dordt's educational program. A more detailed statement



was created in 1968, titled *Scripturally-Oriented Higher Education*.

"*The Task* continues to be the foundation for our work at Dordt," says Dr. Leah Zuidema, vice president for online and graduate education. "We are in a season of higher education where there are so many external changes and pressures on each institution. To stay viable and competitive, Dordt keeps innovating. Yet as we innovate, we need to maintain a strong sense of who we are. *The Task* clearly lays out our purpose. It provides a biblically based calling for us to pursue Christ-centered education. It defines how we work together—the ways in which we bear responsibilities and mutually submit to one another in our offices as students, faculty, staff, board, and president."

To Dr. Wayne Kobes, professor emeritus of theology, *The Task* provides guidelines for what Dordt believes and why.

"*The Task* is our attempt to draw basic principles from Scripture and Reformed thought. We show that, as an institution, this is the direction we are moving, and that biblical principles undergird our beliefs," says Kobes. "Within that, you can ask questions and debate issues, but we as an institution have a place to stand."

Having a place to stand is a bit rare these days, especially in higher education.

"Many Christian universities don't have a clear direction or are wishy-washy in what they believe," says Kobes. "How do you prevent that from happening at Dordt? *The Task* helps us to stay the course."

### LIVING OUT THE TASK

Students may not realize it, but *The Educational Task of Dordt University* is an integral part of the faculty and staff experience at Dordt. To apply for a position at Dordt, faculty and staff must submit a personal statement where, in addition to expressing their religious convictions, they interact with and comment on *The Task* and the four curricular coordinates derived from the document: religious orientation, creational structure, creational development,



Dr. Wayne Kobes says *The Task* is a thumbnail encapsulation of the Founders Vision, which states that "all of the students'...activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity."

and contemporary response. The hiring committees consider the personal statements just as important as a résumé, cover letter, or personal references.

"I think asking faculty and staff to respond to *The Task* from the get-go clarifies Dordt's identity for some. For others, it plants seeds of questions they should ask about what it means to be Reformed," says Dr. Jeff Ploegstra, a biology professor at Dordt.

Dordt. Then, after two years of teaching, faculty members respond once more to *The Task*, this time considering how they have developed their understanding of what it means to teach Christianly.

"When faculty write their two-year papers for the board of trustees, the expectation is that each person is interacting with *The Task*," says Kobes.

And, even if faculty never specifically reference *The Task* in their classrooms, students are influenced by it.

"Some view a Christian college as having Bible study groups on campus, going to chapel, or doing service projects," says Kobes. "But at Dordt, we think about how that affects the very

structure, the organizational system, the curriculum—individual classes. It's not simply that I'm teaching as a Christian—I want to think about the four coordinates

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— Dr. Leah Zuidema, vice president for online and graduate education

Once hired, faculty and staff members wrestle with *The Task* again in New Faculty and Staff Orientation, a seminar designed to give new employees a background for working and thriving at



and how they come through in what I teach.”

*The Task* is theoretical in nature. In 1993, to make *The Task* more operational, Dordt’s faculty adopted *The Educational Framework of Dordt University*, which addresses how to apply *The Task* to the overall academic program. *The Framework*, as its preface states, “clarifies what the academic program should look like and how it should be structured to fulfill the mission of the university.” To this day, each academic department at Dordt is asked to design programs and courses that implement the goals posed under the four coordinates.

“*The Task* is our why—why Dordt exists—and *The Framework* is our how—how we teach in light of our reason for existing,” says Aaron Baart, dean of chapel.

In his courses, Dr. Ethan Brue, professor of engineering, uses Scripture not for devotions but for providing a weekly class outline and justification. “Scripture defines the space in which we construct the simple circuit. It does not supply the content, rather it guides and directs us to the field in which the details of engineering find their ultimate context.”

If you attended Dordt, some of the terminology found in *The Task* might sound familiar. What about the word “sphere”—defined as “a realm of human life that has its own distinctive calling,

## WHAT IS THE TASK?

*The Educational Task of Dordt University* is broken into seven chapters:

**Chapter One (“Basis”):** “At Dordt University, we confess that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, his infallible and authoritative revelation.”

**Chapter Two (“Context”):** “The nature of education must be understood in the context of God’s mandate to steward the earth.”

**Chapter Three (“Structure”):** “Participating in the educational task of Dordt University is to be understood as a calling.”

**Chapter Four (“Authority”):** All authority is given by God and is therefore always delegated and representative.”

**Chapter Five (“Content”):** “The central educational task of Dordt University is to provide Christian insight on an advanced level.”

**Chapter Six (“Implementation”):** “Central to the implementation of the educational task of Dordt University is the curriculum, the basic means for sharing serviceable insight.”

**Chapter Seven (“Academic Freedom”):** “Dordt University confesses that the source of true freedom is Jesus Christ. However, such freedom is not to be equated with Enlightenment philosophy.”

It includes a glossary that defines frequently-used terms such as “cultural mandate” and “serviceable insight.” To read *The Educational Task of Dordt University* in its entirety, please visit [dordt.edu/task](http://dordt.edu/task).



authority, and responsibility”? That can be found in *The Task*. What about the notion of an “office”—that, in any social context, “certain individuals will have responsibility to care for the common good of the community”? That’s in *The*

*Task*, too.

“*The Task* is very distinctly us—some language that’s been coined here at Dordt,” says Baart. “We like that it’s weird and different.”

Another oft-used term is “serviceable insight.” According to *The Task*, a Dordt education is about more than transmission of information or knowledge; it strives for transformation of the whole person. Wholly dependent on biblical wisdom, this transformation is cultivated in community and equips individuals to serve God and neighbor. “We do not pursue wisdom simply for wisdom’s sake or personal benefit,” says *The Task*. “Rather, we are seeking wisdom that enables us to better know, serve, and praise our Creator.” This is the definition of serviceable insight, as described in *The Task*’s glossary.

To Brue, serviceable insight is not static. Every day as he reviews last year’s notes to prepare for his control systems course, he is challenged to put it into practice.

“Our educational goal of providing serviceable insight prompts me to ask, ‘How do I step into this classroom and respond to the risen Lord who turned



“For decades, Dordt faculty have been reiterating their commitment to the education that is unique at Dordt,” says Aaron Baart. “We do education differently at Dordt, and it’s because of *The Task* and *The Framework*.”

to his broken church and said, 'Feed my sheep'? What implications does this invitation to service with the backdrop of an empty tomb have for the modeling of a signal filtering system made up of operational amplifiers cascaded in series?"

Brue does not go into class with an easy answer; instead, he feels challenged to enter each day with a new context.

"My primary goal is not that the students have more insight into my particular field, to theoretically know how to mathematically model and predict the performance, or to simply create a circuit that functions," he says. "My overarching goal is that all of these activities and the students—myself included—find their purpose and goal in the fields of the Lord. Yes, serviceable insight relates to content, but it relates even more so to context. Before we get hung up on exactly what sheep need to eat and how they should do so, we need to remember that it all starts in the pasture. Sheep wandering around by themselves in the wrong space altogether don't get fed."

Hoekstra thinks that, on a macro level,

the notion of being office-bearers is what makes Dordt an engaging place to work and live.

"*The Task* describes how, at Dordt, we have five distinctive offices—board, student, faculty, staff, and president—yet we're all similar in that we serve as office-bearers in Christ's kingdom, rather than simply as volunteers, consumers, or employees," says Hoekstra. "Having us

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— Dr. Manuela Ayee, engineering professor

all understand our work at Dordt in that light makes a transformative difference in both how and why we labor together. I think it's at the heart of why *The Wall Street Journal* has recognized Dordt as the top school in America for student engagement over the past four years. I think it's the main reason that Dordt's

alumni engagement—both in terms of legacy student enrollment and alumni giving percentages—are among the highest in the country. I think it's a huge reason for our low faculty turnover and high student retention levels."

Educating, according to *The Task*, is the responsibility of the whole campus community, no matter what office you bear. "These students have been entrusted into our care by their parents—we're using the Scriptures to help students realize their potential and learn how to apply it when they graduate. Their time at Dordt is formative, so that responsibility is heavy," says Dr. Manuela A.A. Ayee ('06), an engineering professor.

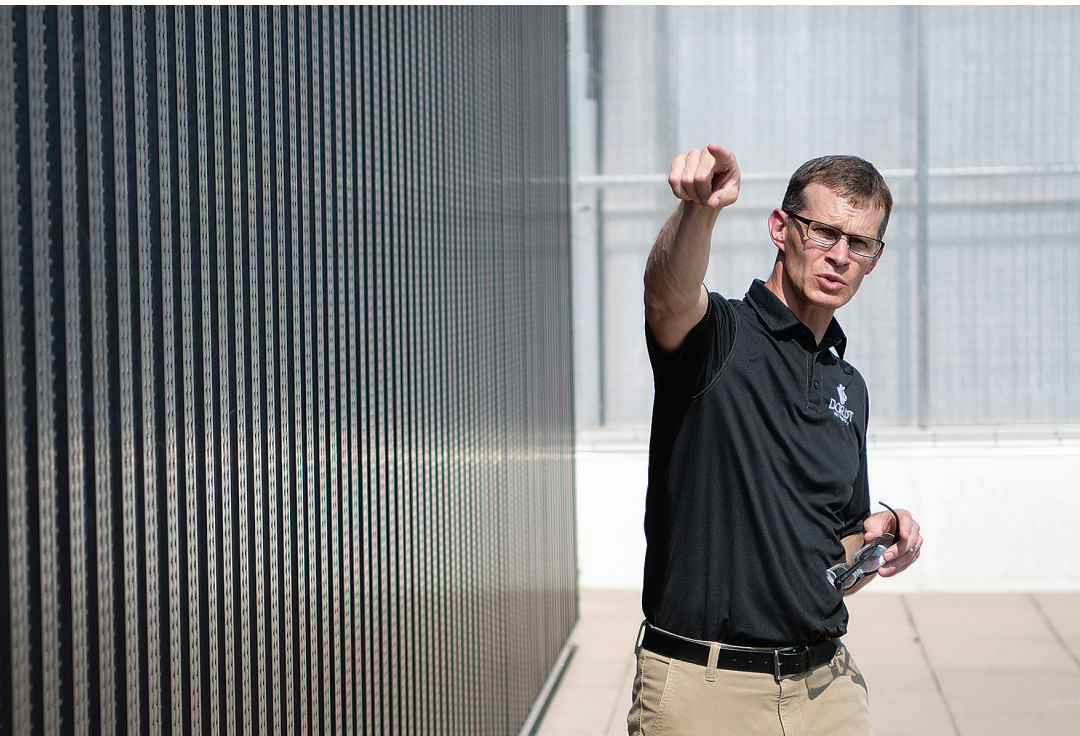
In her research, Ayee recognizes how creation is structured and how all of creation is interconnected because God created it that way. Working on the molecular level, Ayee can't touch, feel, or discover as much as she can deduce from experiments or computational work.

"Having God's sovereignty in the background reminds me that, whatever I'm seeing, God is allowing me to see—he allows us to unfold his creation daily," she says.

"Something that happens in one sphere, like cells in the body, can move on and affect the rest of the body, causing disease, for example," she says. "I see it as a breakdown of the order or structure God intended—not as a random occurrence. And, if this is a breakdown of creational structure, what can we do to move toward restoration?"

Viewing belief as more than Sunday activity and recognizing God's sovereignty over all provides an opportunity to think about what it means to be God's disciples in all academic fields, including in research, says Dr. Abby Foreman, a social work professor at Dordt.

"If you come from a Reformed perspective and are doing research, you know that you are doing what God has called you to do, even if the word 'Christian' isn't in the title of your research project," she says. "I think that comprehensive view helps us to be confident in our research and scholarship and to think deeply about what it means to live our lives as disciples through our research."



JAMIN VER VELDE ('99)

"I use Scripture for providing a weekly class outline and justification," says Dr. Ethan Brue.



## REFRESHING THE TASK

Three years ago, Kobes, Baart, and a committee of faculty and staff worked to refresh the language of *The Task*.

"This was an opportunity to put *The Task* in the hands of the next generation of faculty to shape it and own it at a deeper level," says Baart. "Our mandate was to refresh the language—we were not supposed to rewrite the document. Everyone loved the vision; the content was not up for grabs. We had to maintain the meaning but use language that was a better fit for today."

"The goal was to make the principles more understandable to a wider Christian audience," says Foreman, a committee member.

To do that, the committee rephrased certain words or phrases that may have been difficult for some to understand and provided a glossary of frequently-used terms like "office" and "serviceable insight."

"You might think that refreshing or changing a few words wouldn't take much time, but it did," jokes Foreman.

*The Task* took nearly three years to

refresh. Foreman believes the revised version is more readable without losing the integrity and conviction of the original version. And she thinks that the willingness to work through the long process demonstrates how much the mission and task of Dordt means to its employees.

“In a role where I am responsible to lead change on an ongoing basis, I find the stability and flexibility called for in *The Task* to be essential for decision-making.

— Dr. Leah Zuidema, vice president for online and graduate education

"If we took out a sentence, the faculty wanted us to say why we took it out," says Foreman. "They wanted to be careful that nothing was watered down or lost."

"People care," says Ploegstra. "They care about Dordt's identity, and they want the college to thrive and do its task well."

"*The Task* is our theology and philosophy of education—it's our worldview; it's what we believe we are trying to instill in every student that comes to Dordt," says Baart. "It's a longer version of the mission statement—it explains who we are, why we do what we do, and why that matters."

## STAYING TRUE TO THE TASK

In the 2020 *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings, Dordt tied for second most innovative school in the Midwest. With programs like Pro-Tech and state-of-the-art facilities like the Carl and Gloria Zylstra Nursing Education Center, Dordt leaders try to think outside of the box regarding higher education. *The Educational Task of Dordt University* helps them do so by providing a unique take on how a Reformed confession of biblical faith impacts Christian education.

"As we innovate, *The Task* gives us guidance about what needs to stay the same and what can—and should—change," says Zuidema. "What

ADRIAN GRONINGEN (18)



Dr. Leah Zuidema leads innovative initiatives around campus. During Defender Days, she spoke at the dedication of the Carl and Gloria Zylstra Nursing Education Center.

endures is that we live in response to our Creator, Redeemer, and Lord—in anything and everything that students learn, whether in class, in co-curricular activities, in residence life, or in campus ministries. What changes is that each new generation of students faces new cultural challenges and opportunities. *The Task* holds us responsible to shape learning experiences in anticipation of what our graduates will need in order to live faithfully for Christ."

One of Zuidema's favorite passages from Chapter 6 of *The Task* speaks to this:

"Dordt provides insight into crucial challenges and opportunities facing contemporary culture. Living in a global community, we continually encounter issues that require discernment and thoughtful engagement. Dordt implements a curriculum sufficiently flexible to address these challenges and opportunities as they arise. In our study of history and contemporary problems through a Reformed perspective, Dordt instills the ability to discern the spirits and to engage in redemptive transformation of cultural activity."

"In a role where I am responsible to lead change on an ongoing basis, I find the stability and flexibility called for in *The Task* to be essential for decision-making,"

## GATHERING EXTENSIVE INPUT

In addition to committee meetings where faculty and staff made line-item edits, Baart and Kobes met frequently to rework drafts of *The Task*. They brought in retired faculty, including Dr. John Van Dyk and Dr. Calvin Jongsma, to speak to the context of when the original document had been written. Baart and Kobes held open forums where faculty and staff could respond; they built time into faculty workshops where faculty could provide suggestions on how to update the language. The committee wrestled with words and phrases—for example, with regard to the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, they asked whether the translation should say "subdue the earth" or "nurture the earth."

# ALUMNI NOTES

**Lydia Marcus** ('18) and **Ashley Huizinga** ('18) presented a poster at the annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois on July 19-21. Their post was titled "Breast Cancer Epidemiology: A Case Study in Using Science for Social Justice."

This summer, **Aaron Van Beek** ('18) was recognized as an Iowan of the Day at the 2019 Iowa State Fair. Van Beek, a third-grade teacher at Kinsey Elementary School in Sioux Center, is the president and director of the Midwest Honor Flight, an organization that "provides veterans with honor, respect, and closure with an all-expense-paid trip to our nation's capital." Van Beek was one of 10 Iowans to receive the Iowan of the Day honor, which recognizes individuals for their volunteer efforts.



**Cora Okkema** ('16) is working on a master's degree at the competitive Livestock Behavior and Welfare Program at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. Through this program, Okkema has the opportunity to study under Dr. Temple Grandin, a world-renowned expert in animal science and an autism spokesperson.

**Evan Westra** ('11) was selected as a 2019 CFE Media and Technology Engineering Leader Under 40. Westra, who works as a lead project engineer at Interstates in Sioux Center, has worked on projects in many industries such as flour and feed milling, oil seed processing, meat processing, and grain elevators. The award is given to individuals who have made significant contributions to the success of their companies and to the control and plant engineering professions.



Campus artwork displays the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

says Zuidema. "These principles are at the heart of developing the 2020-25 strategic plan; they are essential as we plan new online and graduate programs. I'm thankful for the foresight that the original authors had in writing *The Task* and for the in-depth conversations that were so crucial as our committee worked together to refresh *The Task*."

"Staying true to *The Task* means keeping the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration central to education at Dordt," says Hoekstra. "I believe that the core of sin is when humans put themselves at the center of the story—rather than Christ. It's what we read about when original sin crept into the Garden of Eden—it's what happened throughout the people of Israel's time. It's also what has caused the loss of vision for formerly Christian colleges and universities like Harvard and many others."

"*The Educational Task of Dordt University* reminds us to remain grounded in God's call for Dordt," Hoekstra adds. "While we need to keep innovating and growing as an institution—adding programs and improving delivery options—we need to test it all in light of *The Task* and continually ask ourselves whether we're remaining faithful to God's revelation to us in Scripture and creation."

SARAH MOSS ('10)

## WHAT ARE THE FOUR COORDINATES?

The four coordinates guide the application of *The Task* within the curriculum. The four coordinates are:

**Religious orientation:** "Who owns the cosmos and who owns your heart?" Students need to know where they and others stand, acknowledging that the whole world belongs to God.

**Creational structure:** "How do things hold together?" Students need to understand that God made the world as a structured interconnected whole, obedient and subject to his laws.

**Creational development:** "How do things unfold?" Students need to know how our world became what it is now and that everything they do affects the world for good or for evil.

**Contemporary response:** "How are we called to respond?" Students need to translate what they learn into thoughts and deeds that will enable them to live and work in the world as Christ's disciples.

To learn more, please see page 13 of *The Educational Task of Dordt University*.